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More on the Death of Jesus and Its Meaning

For Paul, Christ did not merely die but died *for sins*. His death determines the value of his life and, in turn, determines our relationship to God. Christ's death comes under the topic of atonement; its benefits come under the topic of justification. Since the apostolic period both doctrines have been interpreted differently. One understanding of Christ's death as atonement has been more prominent than others at different times in history. By concentrating on one understanding and not giving sufficient attention to others, the church falls into error. The same is also true for justification. In this issue, we continue the discussion on the atonement that began in the July 2008 issue (*CTQ* 72:3) and expand it to include justification. William C. Weinrich shows that Adam's transgression was not just another sin among others: the fall corrupted our human nature and thus immortality was replaced with death. According to Athanasius this could only be resolved by the divine Word assuming human nature and dying to offer atonement. Naomichi Masaki shows that many contemporary views fit under "Christ died for sins." Some develop previously undeveloped aspects. Other understandings are so false that the totality of Christianity is corrupted. Prominent in Luther studies is Tuomo Mannermaa, who holds that for the Reformer justification takes place by the indwelling of the deity in the believer. Timo Laato correlates the doctrine of justification as held by Mannermaa and his Finnish Luther School with the views of the Reformation-era theologian Andreas Osiander and traditional Roman Catholicism. Jonathan Edwards brings to mind an early colonial American theologian who outdid John Calvin in his sermon on sinners in the hands of an angry God. Lawrence R. Rast Jr. traces how Edwards, in attempting to ameliorate a severe doctrine of predestination by allowing faith to be the individual's voluntary response, introduced Arminianism into the core of his theology. We hope these articles enrich your understanding of Jesus' death and its benefits.

For those who enjoy early Missouri Synod history, a contribution in the *Theological Observer* section discusses an event among our spiritual ancestors that has been often passed over, maybe with good reason.

David P. Scaer
Editor

Contemporary Views on Atonement in Light of the Lutheran Confessions

Naomichi Masaki

"All heresy strikes at this *dear* article of Jesus Christ."¹ For Martin Luther, heresy was not just an academic or formal disagreement over the correctness of doctrine; it had to do with Jesus and his office. Jesus alone answered for our sin on Calvary, and he alone delivers forgiveness to us through the means of grace and the office that serves those means.² Luther saw the devil attempting to reduce Jesus to *nothing* in order that his way of delivering the gifts may be disturbed.³ Nothing was more harmful and intolerable for Luther than heresy that deprived him of Jesus his *dear* Savior.

Luther witnessed moves to accommodate belief in Jesus to the religious and cultural environment.⁴ This has continued in our own age. Jesus remains a popular figure to be sure, but people searching for personal communion with the divine tend to make up a Jesus whom they like, as Stephen Prothero demonstrated in his *American Jesus: How the Son*

¹ Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1993 [hereafter WA]), 50:267,17-18; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986 [hereafter LW]), 34:208. *The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith*, 1538 (emphasis added).

² In the Gospels, Jesus is confessed to be the Son of God precisely when he hangs dead on the cross (Matt 27:54 and Mark 15:39; cf. Luke 19:41 and John 20:28). The very first sermon after Jesus' ascension and sending of the Spirit in Jerusalem was that the hearers were responsible for the crucifixion of the Messiah (Acts 2:36). Paul was preaching "the word of the cross" (1 Cor 1:18), having decided "to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). At the Lord's table, the eating and drinking of Jesus' body and blood is at the same time a proclamation of "the death of the Lord" until he comes (1 Cor 11:26).

³ WA 50:269,1-4; LW 34:210. "What does it profit you that you confess him to be God and man, if you do not also believe that he has become everything and has done everything for you?" WA 50:269,8-10; LW 34:210.

⁴ Cf., Norman E. Nagel, "Martinus: 'Heresy, Doctor Luther, Heresy!'" The Person and Work of Christ," in *Seven-Headed Luther: Essays in Commemoration of a Quincentenary 1483-1983*, ed. Peter Newman Brooks (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 26-49.

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of God Became a National Icon.⁵ The massive success of "The Da Vinci Code" reflects the hunger of millions to see Jesus as a regular person—a man with a wife and a child, and a popular teacher whose true story was subverted. He was, they claim, a sage, mystic, rabbi, boyfriend, father, pacifist, ascetic, and prophet.⁶ Along with attacks on the divine nature of Jesus, challenges to his work of salvation have also come. In Britain, Steve Chalke's claim that Jesus' death on the cross was "divine child abuse" stirred a considerable controversy among evangelicals.⁷ In the United States, the violent imagery of the cross is avoided by many favorite TV preachers.⁸ Building up a positive self-image of Christians seems to be more important than the preaching of Christ crucified.

Luther's statement that "all heresy strikes at this dear article of Jesus Christ" is still applicable. What are the current views of the atonement? Is the death of Jesus transformed into something that it really is not?⁹ In this essay, we will survey contemporary views on the doctrine of the atonement and present a theological critique of these views in light of the Lutheran Confessions.

⁵ Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

⁶ Cf., Lisa Miller, "A Portrait of Faith: Pope Benedict Becomes the Teacher He Always Wanted to Be," *Newsweek*, May 21, 2007, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/34753/page/1>.

⁷ Madison Trammel, "Cross Purposes: Biggest Christian Conference Splits amid Growing Atonement Debate," *Christianity Today* 51 (July 2007): 15-16. Trammel reports that three of Great Britain's most prominent Christian groups, i.e., Keswick Ministries, the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF), and Spring Harvest, have ended their 14-year conference partnership because of the disagreement over the view of Steve Chalke on the atonement expressed in *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). On July 6-8, 2005, the Evangelical Alliance (EA), an umbrella organization for U. K. evangelicals, co-hosted with the London School of Theology a public debate on the atonement. Critiques of penal substitution made by Steve Chalke, Joel Green, Graham McFarlane, Steve Motyer, Stuart Murray Williams, and Lynnette Mullings charged that the penal substitution model has problems because it lacked a persuasive socio-political theological outworking. The Evangelical Alliance revised its doctrinal statement, but it still upholds penal substitution; see "Atonement Symposium," *Evangelical Alliance Web site* (July 8, 2005), <http://www.eauk.org/media/joint-evangelical-alliance-london-school.cfm>.

⁸ For example, Joel Osteen wrote in his latest book: "At the start of each new day, remind yourself: 'I am talented. I am creative. I am greatly favored by God. I am equipped. I am well able. I will see my dreams come to pass.' Declare those statements by faith and before long, you will begin to see them in reality." *Become a Better You* (New York: A Free Press, 2007), 22.

⁹ Cf., Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

I. The Doctrine of the Atonement Today

The Atonement Theories

Ever since the publication of Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor* in 1931,¹⁰ it has become a habit of the Western church to speak of the doctrine of the atonement in terms of three major types or theories: objective, subjective, and dramatic (which Aulén also calls the classic theory).¹¹ Despite the appearance of numerous critiques against his advocacy of the dramatic theory, few theologians seem to have avoided his classification scheme when presenting the doctrine of the atonement.¹²

Among those who held to the vicarious satisfaction understanding of the atonement,¹³ disagreements arose as to the nature and effect of Jesus'

¹⁰ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (New York: MacMillan, 1931). This work is a translation of the Swedish original, *Den Kristna Försoningstanken: Huvudtyper och Brytningar* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Kiakonistyrelse, 1930). The literal translation of the Swedish title is: *The Christian Reconciliation-Thinking: The Chief Types and Accents*.

¹¹ The objective atonement is where God is the object of Christ's atoning work, which delivers men from the guilt of sin. The subjective atonement, on the other hand, consists in a change taking place in men rather than a changed attitude on the part of God. The dramatic atonement designates a view in which Christ fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 1-7.

¹² On Aulén's influence over American Lutheranism, see Kent S. Knutson, *His Only Son Our Lord: Ideas about the Christ* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966).

¹³ A long line of evangelical thinkers have embraced some version of the penal substitution theory, including Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1872), 2:464-543; W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. (1894; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 711-720; Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement Through Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936); John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955); Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 144-213; Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965); Robert H. Culpepper, *Interpreting the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966); J. I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve?: The Logic of Penal Substitution," *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974): 3-45; John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986); and Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993). The penal substitution theory is essentially supported by *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today, Papers from the Fourth Oak Hill College Annual School of Theology*, ed. David Petersen (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2001); Peter G. Bolt, *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); and Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III, eds., *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives, Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004). A study of Anselm and Luther on the

sacrifice with respect to God and his demands. This controversy was exemplified in the twentieth-century debate over whether the Greek word *ἰλάσκεσθαι*, and related terms used for the atonement, should be translated as “propitiation” (i.e., appeasement) or “expiation” (i.e., the removal of sin).¹⁴ After Abelard in the twelfth century, the subjective view of the atonement did not gain much support until the rise of nineteenth-century theologians Horace Bushnell, Hastings Rashdall, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, and R. S. Franks.¹⁵

In recent years some theologians have been making use of Aulén’s third and main theory of the atonement—the dramatic, classic, or *Christus Victor* motif¹⁶—in order to develop a nonviolent liberationist understanding of the atonement. Simon S. Mailela argues that the *Christus Victor* theory needs to be revised to include the concrete historical forces of

atonement by Burnell F. Eckardt, Jr., remains a unique contribution in the field; see *Anselm and Luther on the Atonement: Was It “Necessary”?* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992). We may also make note of the so-called moral government theory of Hugo Grotius (which originated over against the satisfaction theory of Anselm), the moral influence theory of Abelard, and the Reformed penal substitution theory. In this latter theory, God’s hatred of sin is demonstrated by the suffering of Christ. This view has often been adopted by those within the Wesleyan/Arminian tradition, such as John Miley, *The Atonement in Christ* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1879) and J. Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1994), 330–335.

¹⁴ C. H. Dodd, arguing for the expiation view, opened up the debate with his article, “ἰλάσκεσθαι, its Cognates, Derivatives, and Synonyms in the Septuagint,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 32 (1931): 352–360. Leon Morris eventually offered his well-known counterargument, first articulated in “The Use of ἰλάσκεσθαι, etc. in Biblical Greek,” *Expository Times* 62 (1951): 227–233, and later expanded in his book *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 144–213.

¹⁵ Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice, Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation* (New York: Scribner, 1866); Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of the Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1920); Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. and trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, 2nd ed. (1830; repr., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 458; Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, ed. and trans. H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macaulay (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1900); and R. S. Franks, *The Atonement* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

¹⁶ Aulén’s *Christus Victor* motif has been picked up by a number of scholars who hold it as a way to understand the work of Christ; see Sydney Cave, *The Doctrine of the Work of Christ* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1937); Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, 2 vols. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 1:303–348; Rowan A. Greer, “Christ the Victor and the Victim,” *CTQ* 59 (1995): 1–30; Karl Heim, *Jesus the World’s Perfector*, trans. D. H. Van Daalen (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959); R. Leivestad, *Christ the Conqueror* (New York: Macmillan, 1954); J. S. Whale, *Victor and Victim* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960); and Robert Webber, *The Church in the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 267.

economic and political oppression.¹⁷ Darby Kathleen Ray criticizes Anselm's "vicarious satisfaction" and Abelard's "moral influence" theories, contending that these models foster values such as sacrifice, obedience, and dependency—values that reinforce victimization and economic-, race-, or gender-based subordination.¹⁸ J. Denny Weaver writes from an Anabaptist (Mennonite) perspective of Christian pacifism, promoting a view which he calls "Narrative Christus Victor."¹⁹ He attempts to create a holistic theology encompassing Jesus' complete nonviolent ministry that includes his death, while criticizing the penal substitution theory. Gregory A. Boyd combines an open theism view with the warfare between God and Satan as a cosmic battle, pointing the way for the church to be involved in this struggle.²⁰

Aulén's three motifs are not the only categories. There is an ongoing quest in recent literature for the most suitable theory by which to understand the atonement. John Driver has noted no less than ten motifs of New Testament atonement images: conflict-victory-liberation, vicarious suffering, archetypal images (representative man, pioneer, forerunner, firstborn), martyr, sacrifice, expiation/the wrath of God, redemption-purchase, reconciliation, justification, and adoption-family.²¹ Driver points out that any one of Aulén's traditional motifs falls short of comprehending the whole biblical imagery of atonement. Similarly, Peter Schmiechen affirms a multiplicity of atonement theories and has supplied four overarching categories for grouping them: "Christ Died for Us" (sacrifice, justification by grace, and penal substitution); "Liberation from Sin, Death, and Demonic Powers" (liberation); "The Purposes of God" (the renewal of the creation, the restoration of the creation, and Christ the goal of creation); and "Reconciliation" (Christ the way to the knowledge of God, Christ the Reconciler, and the wondrous love of God).²² Ted Peters accepts Aulén's classification but enlarges it to include six models of the atonement: Jesus as the teacher of true knowledge, our moral example and influence, *Christus Victor*, our satisfaction, the happy exchange, and the final

¹⁷ Simon S. Maimela, "The Atonement in the Context of Liberation Theology," *International Review of Mission* 75 (1986): 261–269.

¹⁸ Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1998).

¹⁹ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

²⁰ Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), and *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

²¹ John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986).

²² Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

scapegoat.²³ Contributors to *Cross-Examination* argue that the church is moving in the twenty-first century toward a fourth category of the atonement theory on top of Aulén's three models: various liberation models.²⁴ Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy summarize the atonement views into five categories: *Christus Victor* view (early church), the satisfaction view (Anselm, eleventh century), the subjective view (Abelard, twelfth century), the penal substitution view (Luther, Calvin, sixteenth century), and the moral government view (Grotius, seventeenth century).²⁵ Contributors to *The Nature of the Atonement* present four views of the atonement: the *Christus Victor* view (Gregory Boyd), the penal substitution view (Thomas Schreiner), the healing view (Bruce Reichenbach), and the kaleidoscopic view (Joel Green).²⁶

Critiques of the Traditional Views of the Atonement

Another way to look at contemporary views on the atonement is to examine critiques that have been offered against the traditional views. First, some critics maintain that the traditional doctrine of the atonement has lost relevancy and must be contextualized. Joel Green and Mark Baker provide examples of how culture has influenced theories of the atonement.²⁷ They claim that the *Christus Victor* model in Irenaeus and Gregory of Nyssa was effective because it addressed the cosmology and needs of the people of that period, the satisfaction model of Anselm was culturally relevant because it addressed the feudal system of the day, and the like. Green and Baker argue that since the church has always developed different models of the atonement in response to the cultural context of the times, today's church needs to develop images that speak to our own context. They presented a concept of shame to interpret the atonement in the Japanese context.²⁸ Douglas John Hall is another example

²³ Ted Peters, "Atonement and the Final Scapegoat," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 19 (Summer 1992): 151-181, and "Six Ways of Salvation: How Does Jesus Save?" *dialog* 45 (Fall 2006): 223-235.

²⁴ Marit Trelstad, ed., *Cross-Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

²⁵ Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 113-131.

²⁶ James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

²⁷ Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

²⁸ Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 153-170. Makito Masaki argues that the solution for the gospel proclamation in Japan is Lutheran theology and anthropology rather than the concept of contextualization; see "The Use of Luther's

of similar contextualization because he presents the theology of the cross self-consciously in a post-September 11 world.²⁹ Vitor Westhelle incorporates liberationist thinking into Luther's theology of the cross, arguing on the basis of the nonviolent understanding of the atonement that the church needs to be involved in the pain and death in the world rather than staying away from them.³⁰

Second, there are a considerable number of feminist theologians calling for changes to our understanding of Jesus' death. Rita Nakashima Brock charges that the image of God as father reflects the family structure of patriarchal culture where fathers tend to be both in control and absent.³¹ She also argues that Jesus is not the locus of the redemptive event; it is the task of the human community that saves the world from the sin of patriarchy.³² Rather than Jesus saving us, Brock believes that we need to save Jesus. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker sound a similar note:

Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering. Is it any wonder that there is so much abuse in modern society when the predominant image or theology of the culture is of "divine child abuse" – God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son? If Christianity is to be liberating for the oppressed, it must itself be liberated from this theology. We must do away with the atonement, this idea of a blood sin upon the whole human race which can be washed away only by the blood of the lamb. . . . We do not need to be saved by Jesus' death from some original sin. We need to be liberated from the oppression of racism, classism, and sexism, that is, from patriarchy.³³

Theological Anthropology in Addressing Current Japanese Thought" (STM thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1992).

²⁹ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Own Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

³⁰ Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006). Cf., Roy A. Harrisville, *Fracture: The Cross as Irreconcilable in the Language and Thought of the Biblical Writers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

³¹ Rita Nakashima Brock, "And a Little Child Will Lead Us: Christology and Child Abuse," in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 42-61.

³² Rita Nakamura Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

³³ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 26-27.

Mary J. Streufert asserts that male-centeredness and sacrifice in Christology are problematic to feminist theologians.³⁴ Her solution is to recover the theology of Schleiermacher. Borrowing Dawn DeVries' study of Schleiermacher,³⁵ Streufert argues that the atonement theory may be released from its violent paradigm when the redemptive work of Christ is relocated from the sacrificial appeasement to the preached word. Preaching is not only the locus of atonement but also the genderless incarnation of Christ.³⁶

Related to the feminist critique is the evaluation of traditional atonement theories given by Steve Chalke³⁷ and Alan Mann. Debate has arisen in evangelical circles about their writing, mostly because of their alleged denial of penal substitution, as evinced in this statement:

The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement "God is love." If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil. The truth is, the cross is a symbol of love. It is a demonstration of just how far God as Father and Jesus as his Son are prepared to go to prove that love. The cross is a vivid statement of the powerlessness of love.³⁸

Recently a strongly negative response to Chalke appeared in a collection of essays entitled *Pierced For Our Transgressions*.³⁹ N. T. Wright, who

³⁴ Mary J. Streufert, "Reclaiming Schleiermacher for Twenty-first Century Atonement Theory: The Human and the Divine in Feminist Christology," *Feminist Theology* 15 (2006): 98-120.

³⁵ Dawn DeVries, *Jesus Christ in the Preaching of Calvin and Schleiermacher* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996).

³⁶ For a much more traditional understanding of the atonement from a feminist perspective, see Nancy J. Duff "Atonement and the Christian Life: Reformed Doctrine from a Feminist Perspective," *Interpretation* 53 (1999): 27. She explains the atonement according to the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. Robert Sherman also uses the threefold office of Christ as a way to describe the work of reconciliation in *King, Priest and Prophet: A Trinitarian Theology of Atonement* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004).

³⁷ See above, 306 n. 7.

³⁸ Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182-183.

³⁹ Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced For Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

previously commended Chalke's book, countered the response by saying that it does not, in fact, deny the penal substitution theory; instead it expressed the opinion that there are several forms of the doctrine of penal substitution, with some more biblical than others.⁴⁰ Some Lutheran theologians are also challenging the understanding of the atonement as penal substitution.⁴¹

Third, the studies of literary critic René Girard have also resulted in a powerful criticism of penal substitution.⁴² Girard claims that the root of ritual in all religion and all culture is human violence, which arises out of the "mimetic desire" that sets people onto a deadly rivalry. Religion transforms the human violence into "sacred violence." The death of Jesus should not be seen as a sacrifice but a scapegoat, a means of purification to maintain social order. Jesus was the final scapegoat who broke the pattern of "mimetic desire." Girard's theory influenced a number of theologians, including Raymond Schwager, James G. Williams, and Robert G. Hammerton-Kelly, who applied the thought of Girard to biblical interpretations.⁴³ This theory also influenced Ted Peters, William C. Placher, Anthony W. Bartlett, and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, who interact with Girard's theory in their presentations on atonement.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ N. T. Wright, "The Cross and the Caricatures—A Response to Robert Jenson, Jeffrey John, and a New Volume Entitled *Pierced for Our Transgressions*," *Fulcrum: Renewing the Evangelical Centre Web site* (Eastertide 2007), <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2007/20070423wright.cfm?doc=205>.

⁴¹ For example, David A. Brondos, *Paul on the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), and *Fortress Introduction to Salvation and the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

⁴² René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (French, 1972; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (French, 1978; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); and *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (French, 1982; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

⁴³ Raymond Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, trans. Maria L. Assad (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986); James G. Williams, "The Innocent Victim: René Girard on Violence, Sacrifice, and the Sacred," *Religious Studies Review* 14 (1988): 320–326; James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); and Robert G. Hammerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

⁴⁴ Ted Peters, "Atonement and the Final Scapegoat," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 19 (Summer 1992): 151–181; William C. Placher, "Christ Takes Our Place: Rethinking Atonement," *Interpretation* 53 (1999): 5–20; Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001); and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Atonement in Postmodernity: Guilt, Goats and

Finally, there are several other new approaches to the atonement that critically evaluate the traditional views. Jon D. Levenson expounds on the theme of the father who offers his beloved son.⁴⁵ He claims that the literal sacrifice of the first born son to Yahweh was an authorized practice in the early church (Genesis 22; Exod 22:28–29; 34:19–20). Jesus did not eliminate this practice but transformed it (John 1:29; Rom 8:32). Like Isaac, Jesus as the paschal Lamb and the Suffering Servant provided his Father in heaven complete pleasure only when he had endured a brutal confrontation of death. David Seeley argues that Paul's interpretation of the death of Jesus was influenced by the martyrology of 2 and 4 Maccabees.⁴⁶ Seeley called it "the Noble Death," which consists of five elements: vicariousness, obedience, a military context, overcoming physical vulnerability, and the application of sacrificial metaphors. Stephen Finlan aims to undo what Aulén did.⁴⁷ If Aulén's *Christus Victor* shifted the center of theology from the incarnation to the atonement, Finlan wants to reverse the shift. Finlan does not attempt to offer another acceptable theory of the atonement; rather, he suggests that salvation should be understood in terms of incarnation and *theosis*, not in terms of sacrifice.

The Disappearing Doctrine of Penal Substitution

Most criticism of the atonement is targeted at the penal substitution theory. Several scholars argue that it is irrelevant, too violent, too individualistic, or insufficient. The centrality of the cross had already vanished from the "liberal" Protestant churches in the nineteenth century. During the last few decades, however, the doctrine of the atonement has weakened and is losing importance in other mainline and evangelical churches as well. What H. Richard Niebuhr wrote of the "old liberals" seems to apply even among some of today's "conservatives": "a God without wrath brought men and women without sin into a Kingdom

Gifts," in *The Glory of the Atonement*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004): 367–404.

⁴⁵ Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice, Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1993).

⁴⁶ David Seeley, *The Noble Death: Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul's Concept of Salvation*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series 28 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

⁴⁷ Stephen Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), and *Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005); cf., *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007).

without judgment through the ministration of a Christ without the cross."⁴⁸

During the sixteenth century, the Reformers and the Roman Catholics appeared to have agreed on the article on Christ but not on the article on justification. Now most debates are about the doctrine of the atonement rather than the subjective side of faith. Paul Tillich was prophetic when he observed the following: first, that in our era guilt *coram Deo* is not the dominant cultural and religious problem and such concepts as meaninglessness and anxiety express the problem better than does sin; second, that "absolute faith," that is, faith without an object is the way to describe the antidote for this contemporary form of what is wrong with us; third, that justification is then understood as awareness of being accepted; and, fourth, that the role of Jesus becomes a revealer rather than a savior.⁴⁹ George Lindbeck found an analogy between Tillich and Karl Rahner, for Rahner also wrote on those four points.⁵⁰

Distaste for Christ's work of atonement is widespread. Is the death of our Lord on the cross to be left open for a variety of these interpretations? Has the church accommodated Jesus to our religious and cultural environment? What do our Confessions say about the atonement?

II. The Atonement in the Lutheran Confessions

If one hopes to find references to the atonement in the Lutheran Confessions by surveying the subject index, puzzlement may result because the word "atonement" does not appear. The reason is simple. The term "atonement" does not derive from Latin or German but from an English word. It probably originated in the use of Anglo-French by the Normans after their conquest of the Anglo-Saxons in AD 1066: *etre a un*, which means "to agree." English Bibles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries began using "atonement" ("at-one-ment") for the Hebrew כִּפָּר (cover over, propitiate) and the Greek ἱλασμός (expiation, propitiation) and καταλλαγή (reconciliation).⁵¹

⁴⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1959/1937), 193.

⁴⁹ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 155-190. On Tillich's view on the atonement, see *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 2:165-180.

⁵⁰ See George Lindbeck, "Justification and Atonement: An Ecumenical Trajectory," in *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess and Marc Kolden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 193-195.

⁵¹ Cf. Ted Peters, "Atonement and the Final Scapegoat," 153.

The Lutheran Confessions, on the other hand, describe the work of Christ with the German term *Versöhnung* (reconciliation), having 2 Corinthians 5:19 as background: "God was in Christ *reconciling* the world to himself." The Confessions also employ other terms such as *Bezahlung* (payment), *Opfer* (sacrifice), *Mittler* (Mediator), and *Genugtuung* (satisfaction) to confess the atonement.⁵² *Reconciliation* is what Jesus has done on the cross and is still doing today as he delivers the forgiveness of sins to the world.

*The Augsburg Confession and Its Apology*⁵³

In the Augsburg Confession, the article on sin (CA II) precedes the article on Christ (CA III). Sin is confessed as inherited since Adam's fall. The Apology states that the sinner is totally powerless to do anything to rescue himself from his sinful status before God and from his captivity to Satan (Ap II, 46–50). Before the formal confession in Article IX, the first reference to Baptism in the Augsburg Confession is found in this Second Article (CA II, 2). To insist that one can save himself is to reject Baptism and the Holy Spirit, and to deny that he is born sinful is to "insult [*zu Schmach*]" and "diminish [*extenuent*]" what Christ has done for the sinner by his suffering and the shedding of his blood (CA II, 3; cf. Ap IV, 157, 204; CA XXVII, 38).

After confessing original sin, Article III unpacks what Christ has done for the sinner⁵⁴ by dividing the work of Jesus into two parts. Jesus was born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried "in order to be a sacrifice [*hostia, ein Opfer*] for sin" and "to reconcile [*reconciliaret, versohnet*] God's wrath" (CA III, 3; Ap III). Jesus descended into hell, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God not only "to rule and reign," but also "to justify and sanctify the believer" (CA III, 4–5; Ap III). In this way, Augsburg Confession and Apology III connect not only the incarnation and the atonement but also the atonement and justification. We hear the same in the Apology: "Thus it is not enough to

⁵² Cf. Kenneth Hagen, "Luther on Atonement—Reconfigured," *CTQ* 61 (1997): 252–253.

⁵³ We will use the following abbreviations for the confessional documents in the Book of Concord: CA for the Augsburg Confession, Ap for the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, SA for the Smalcald Articles, Tr for the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, SC for the Small Catechism, LC for the Large Catechism, FC for the Formula of Concord, Ep for the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, and SD for the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord.

⁵⁴ As if it were the Advent season, CA III confesses the threefold coming of Jesus—his coming into flesh (CA III, 3), his coming in his present ministry (CA III, 4–5), and his final coming for judgment (CA III, 6).

believe that Christ was born, suffered, and was resurrected unless we also add this article, which is the *causa finalis* of the history [of Jesus]: ‘the forgiveness of sins’” (Ap IV, 51).

On the one hand, the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross is confessed to be “sufficient [*satis fuisse, gnugetan hat*] for the sins of the entire world” (Ap XIII, 8). There is nothing to add to what he has done for us (cf., CA XXVI, 21). He bore our sin and penalties. He destroyed the reign of the devil, sin, and death (Ap II, 50). He did this all *for us, in our place*. Therefore, he *alone* is the Reconciler, Mediator, Propitiator, Savior, and High Priest, as well as the mercy seat, the propitiation, the sacrifice, payment, and satisfaction (CA XXI, 2; Ap IV, 53, 156, 179; Ap XII, 76, 140; Ap XXIV, 19–24). It is also confessed, on the other hand, that the same Jesus is *now* delivering the fruits of the cross to us by forgiving, enlivening, and protecting us (CA III, 5; Ap III).

How does Jesus deliver his gifts? The Augsburg Confession says, “through the Holy Spirit” (CA III, 5). Article IV then confesses such a delivery from the point of view of *the receivers*, and Article V confesses the same from the point of view of *the giver*. Forgiveness is received when we believe that Christ has suffered *for us* (CA IV, 2).⁵⁵ Such faith is only possible, however, when there is a mouth that *preaches* the word of the cross to us (*externum verbum*; CA II, 4). For the sake of Jesus’ speaking, the Augsburg Confession confesses that our Lord has instituted the *Predigtamt*, the office that delivers a sermon (CA V, 1–3).

Augsburg Confession VI returns to the confession of *faith*, which lives in believers and produces good works. Articles VII and VIII confess the church to be the place where faith receives the gifts through the means of grace. The confession of each of the means of grace—Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Holy Absolution—follows as instituted by Jesus for his delivery of the forgiveness he accomplished on the cross (CA IX–XII).

This is the way in which the Augsburg Confession and its Apology articulate the works of Christ as *reconciliation*. Jesus *alone* is confessed as *the reconciler*. The doctrine of the atonement is not confessed in isolation; it is not presented as an abstract theory, idea, or concept. It is located within the confession of Sin (CA II), Justification (CA IV), the Office of the Holy Ministry (CA V), Christian Life (CA VI), the Church (CA VII, VIII), Baptism (CA IX), the Lord’s Supper (CA X), Holy Absolution (CA XI), and the Divine Service (CA XXIV).

⁵⁵ The Apology defines faith as receiving the gift that has been bestowed (Ap IV, 48–49, 60, 80, 154).

This understanding of reconciliation in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology is grounded in the Scriptures. The terms *καταλλάσσω* and *καταλλαγή* appear only in two places in the New Testament, 2 Corinthians 5 and Romans 5, which gave the basis for the reformers' confession on the atonement. Again, Paul included two things as he spoke on Christ's work of *reconciliation*. One is Christ on the cross; the other is Jesus in his preaching today. "God was in Christ *reconciling* the world to himself, not taking into account their transgressions against them" (2 Cor 5:19); "He who did not know sin he made sin (sin offering) in our place, so that we may become righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor 5:21).⁵⁶ These words spoke of Christ on the cross, accomplishing our salvation. *In our place* (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν) speaks of *vicarious atonement* on Calvary.⁵⁷ On the other hand, "In the place of Christ, therefore, we are carrying out the office of an ambassador, as if God is appealing through us. We are imploring in the place of Christ, 'Be reconciled with God'" (2 Cor 5:20). These words speak of the reconciliation that Jesus proclaims today, because the apostles Paul and Timothy (2 Cor 1:1) spoke *in the place of Christ* (ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ) as the ones sent by Jesus (cf. 1 Thess 2:13). For Paul, *reconciliation* includes a *report* of the cross and an *address* to the hearers; reconciliation includes justification: "He who did not know sin, in the place of us he made (to be) sin (sin offering), so that we might become righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor 5:21; cf., Rom 5:9, 10).⁵⁸

The Smalcald Articles

The doctrine of justification is usually called *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* (an "article upon which the church stands or falls," or, more literally, the "article of the standing and falling church"). This phrase does not occur in the Lutheran Confessions.⁵⁹ The closest that we find is in the

⁵⁶ Cf., John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 121-124. Kleinig sees in Paul's use of the word "made" in "He who did not know sin he *made* sin offering in our place" an influence of the use of *ἵνα* as a ritual term in Leviticus. God offered Jesus as the "sin offering" for man's sin. Kleinig demonstrates that the heart of all sacrifice is found in vicarious sacrifice.

⁵⁷ See Harald Riesenfeld, "ὑπὲρ," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 8:507-516.

⁵⁸ The close relation between reconciliation and justification may be observed by the use of the word *λογίζεσθαι* (2 Cor 5:19), which is vital to Paul in his understanding of justification (Rom 4:3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 23, 24).

⁵⁹ On the difficulty of finding the origin and history of the phrase, see J. A. O. Preus III, "Justification by Faith: The *Articulus Stantis et Cadentis Ecclesiae*," in *And Every Tongue Confess: Essays in Honor of Norman Nagel on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed.

Smalcald Articles where it reads: "On this article [*Hauptartikel*, "the chief article"], stands all that we teach and live against the pope, the devil, and the world" (SA II, I, 5). This statement corresponds with the Roman position as Luther discerned it: "When the Mass falls, the papacy falls" (SA II, II, 10).

The *chief* article in the Smalcald Articles, however, is not the doctrine of justification, but "the office and work of Jesus Christ [*das Ampt und Werk Jesu Christi*]" (SA II, I). Luther combined the office of Christ and the doctrine of justification in his *Lectures on Galatians 1531: iustificare peccatorem sit solius Christi proprium officium*, "it is the proper office of Christ alone to justify the sinner."⁶⁰ In confessing the *chief* article, Luther did not craft some well-thought-through words and formulations or state his scholarly analysis of the dogmatic tradition of the church (SA II, I, 1-5). Instead, he simply put forward *the words of our Lord*, just as he did in the Small Catechism when he confessed Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. His way is that of homology – saying back to the Lord what he has said to us.

The first thing that Luther confesses is the death and resurrection of Jesus (Rom 4:25), especially that Jesus bore the sins of the world on the cross by shedding his blood as the Lamb of God (John 1:29; Isa 53:6) (SA II, I, 1-2). The uniqueness of the cross of Jesus is confessed by the term "alone." *Jesus alone* went to the cross, bearing the sin of the whole world (SA II, I, 2). It seems that Luther had a vivid sense of the actual sacrament before his eyes as he confessed the atonement.⁶¹ Jesus, who was identified by the voice from heaven and by the confession of John the Baptist as *ebed Yahweh* and the Lamb of God, bore the sins of *many* (πολλοίς; Isa 53:11 LXX; John 1:29). The same Jesus says: "This is my blood of the testament which is shed *for many* [περὶ πολλῶν, ὑπὲρ πολλῶν] for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24). Luther knew that the fruit of the atonement on the cross is given out in the Lord's Supper. Next, Luther confesses the justification of sinners with Romans 3 (SA II, I, 3-4). It seems that the words of Isaiah 53 were still echoing in Luther's ears, because Isaiah says: "My righteous one, my servant, shall justify many, as he shall bear their

Gerald S. Krispin and Jon D. Vieker (Dearborn, MI: The Nagel Festschrift Committee, 1990), 279.

⁶⁰ WA 40.I:406,24-25; LW 26:259. As in the *Large Confession* of 1528, so in the Smalcald Articles, Luther's way of confessing justification is to speak of Christ in terms of what he has accomplished on the cross and what he continues to bestow on us today. Only then does talk of faith appear.

⁶¹ The confession of Jesus *alone* to be *the Lamb of God* was sung in the liturgy in the *Gloria Excelsis* and the *Agnus Dei*.

iniquities" (Isa 53:11). Lastly, Luther adds Acts 4, on the name of Jesus, and concludes with another verse of Isaiah 53 (SA II, I, 5).

To summarize, the chief article (SA II, I) confesses that Jesus *alone* is the *Lamb of God*, who bore the sin of the world and who *alone* justifies. For Luther, the confession of Christ and his office is never complete unless delivery of Jesus in the means of grace is also confessed. Immediately after the chief article, Luther writes: "The Mass in the papacy must be the greatest and most horrible abomination, as it directly and violently opposes against this chief article" (SA II, II, 1).⁶²

In Part III of the Smalcald Articles, Luther then articulates further this chief article of the work and office of Christ in relation with law and gospel, the means of grace, the church, and the life of the Christians in the world. As the confession of the church as "holy believers and 'the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd'" indicates (SA III, XII, 2), *the Lamb of God* who *suffered* on the cross now *speaks* in the church as *the Good Shepherd*.⁶³

Small and Large Catechisms

Within the catechisms, the confession of the Second Article of the Creed and of Holy Baptism is vital for our understanding of the atonement. If *the Lamb of God* was the key title of Jesus in the Smalcald Articles, here it is *the Lord*. The Large Catechism explains: "Let this be the summary of this article, that the little word 'LORD' is the simplest way to say Redeemer, that is, he who has brought us back from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and keeps us there" (LC II, 31). We were captive under the power of the devil. We were condemned to death and entangled in sin. But now Jesus redeemed and released us from sin, death, and the devil (LC II, 26–30). How did Jesus redeem the sinner? The Large Catechism answers that he became man, suffered, died, and was buried to make satisfaction (*genug täte*) for the sinner, and paid what the sinner owed not with silver and gold but with his own precious blood. He

⁶² The Mass in the Roman Church was judged against Romans 4, John 1, Isaiah 53, Romans 3, and Acts 4. Not only the Mass but also purgatory, the appearing of the spirits of the departed, pilgrimages, fraternities, relics, indulgences, the invocation of saints, monasteries, and the papacy in the Roman Church are considered to stand contrary to the chief article of the office and work of Christ, and against his mandate (SA II, II-IV).

⁶³ If what is said about the Roman abuses is seen as Luther's theological diagnosis, what follows in Part III of the Smalcald Articles may be considered as his cure. The twin pillar in this section is the confession of "sin and Christ our Savior" (SA III, I, 11). It also has to do with the proper distinction between law and gospel. "Christ has died in vain," says Luther, if we hold false doctrine (SA III, I, 11; cf., SA Preface, 15).

swallowed up death by his resurrection, ascended, and assumed the authority at the right hand of the Father, where he subjected the devil to him (LC II, 31). In this way, Luther confesses the atonement as Jesus bringing the sinner back from the power of the devil.

Luther's confession of the atonement does not stop here. The Large Catechism says that it is Baptism that brings "the overcoming of devil and death, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the whole Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts" (LC IV, 41; cf. SC IV, 5-6; Baptismal Booklet, 3, 8, 11-22). Moreover, Jesus keeps the baptized within the "boundless [*überschwänglich*]" blessings of Baptism (SC II, 4; LC IV, 42) to live in his kingdom through the Lord's Supper and Holy Absolution. Luther exhorts the baptized to teach the devil to death through the hearing of the word since we are daily still under the dominion of the devil (LC I, 100-102; Preface 19).

The Formula of Concord

The Formula of Concord articulates the atonement by providing further clarifications. Second Corinthians 5, the key passage on *reconciliation* (*Versöhnung, reconciliatio*), now appears explicitly (Ep III, 1; SD III, 30; V, 22; XI, 27; cf., SD III, 4, 54; XI, 15; Ap XXIV, 80). For example, the Solid Declaration says:

In order that the troubled heart may have a steadfast and sure comfort and that Christ's merit and God's grace may be given appropriate honor, Scripture teaches that the righteousness of faith before God consists only in the gracious reconciliation [*gnädiger Versöhnung*] or forgiveness of sins, which is bestowed upon us out of genuine grace solely for the sake of the merits of Christ our Mediator [*des Mittlers Christi*], and is received only through faith in the promise of the Gospel. (SD III, 30)

In this text, justification and atonement are both confessed, as in the rest of the Book of Concord. The Formula adds a renewed emphasis that Jesus died on the cross and serves the church today in the Lord's Supper through both his divine and human natures (SD III, 4; VIII, 4, 78).

III. The Lutheran Confessions and the Doctrine of the Atonement Today

The confessors in the sixteenth century did not address contemporary questions on the doctrine of the atonement, but their understanding of Jesus' death does leave us with guidance in addressing these questions ourselves.

The Atonement as a Theory?

First, we recall that Aulén is largely responsible for presenting the doctrine of the atonement in terms of ideas, concepts, and motifs. While

many current theologians acknowledge that the death of Jesus cannot be understood by only one of the available categories, there is an ongoing quest for the most suitable theory.

What is the Confessions' theory of the atonement? Superficial reading may suggest that the Lutheran Confessions held all the great schemes in one way or the other. A closer look at the Confessions, however, indicates that the confessors articulated the doctrine of the atonement in a fundamentally different way. Theories of the atonement tend to conform to a certain *a priori* pattern of explanation. Some contemporary scholars attempt to understand the atonement by searching for what may have been going on behind the texts of the New Testament. In the Lutheran Confessions, in contrast, the words of the Lord remained not only primary but everything.

In the Smalcald Articles, for example, all Luther did was to confess some key biblical passages without presenting sophisticated theories. Christology is a matter of an *afterthought*, a joyous confession and acclamation of all that Jesus has done *for us*. It is not as though we first figure out how we would like Jesus to be, and then set him up to work that way according to our notion of how he should be God. Jesus does not suffer that way. He does not fit into man's specifications. The Lutheran Confessions do not hope to establish a rational explanation of Christ's accomplishment because it exceeds our comprehension.⁶⁴ The devil can preach the facts, but only the Holy Spirit preaches that Christ died *for you*. Second Corinthians 5, one of the key passages in the Confessions on the atonement, presents the gospel not only as a historical *report* of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, but also as Jesus' own *address* to us with the words *for you*. Yet theology is in constant danger of converting even this *for you* into a "theory" of atonement.

The Lutheran Confessions do not stand *above* the Scriptures but *under* them. Luther speaks of *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*,⁶⁵ that is, a theologian is not of *our* making but *God's* making. Theology for the Lutheran Confessions is not a matter of *vita activa* (doing) or *contemplatio* (theory), but of *vita passiva* (passive life).⁶⁶ We are only passively *given to* by the Lord: *externum*

⁶⁴ Ian D. Kingston Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 108-113.

⁶⁵ *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings, 1539*. WA 50:657-661; LW 34:283-288.

⁶⁶ Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann, 2007), 21-27.

verbum, extra nos. This explains why Luther's confession of the chief article in the Smalcald Articles sounds liturgical and catechetical.

Relocation of the Atonement?

Second, some contemporary thinkers relocate the atonement from the death of Jesus on the cross to his incarnation or to the ongoing preaching in the church. The Lutheran Confessions do not reposition the atonement as preaching to avoid the distaste of the sacrificial death or his male-centeredness. Neither do they move reconciliation from atonement to incarnation to undo the theories of Aulén. Rather, in the Confessions reconciliation includes both Calvary and the means of grace. It is not either Good Friday or preaching; it is both, each having uniqueness in its office and work.

Neither is reconciliation detached from the incarnation. The Formula of Concord emphasizes that Jesus reconciled the world in both divine and human natures. Jesus' ongoing ministry of preaching and sacraments is also by both natures. Instead of isolating the doctrine of the atonement from the rest of the articles, the Lutheran Confessions confess it within the organic wholeness of one doctrine that includes all the articles of faith.

The Atonement as Too Individualistic?

Third, the doctrine of the atonement is troublesome for many because it was considered too individualistic. It is claimed that the church should focus her attention more on economic and political oppression as well as the issues of gender and race. One author even suggested that rather than Jesus saving us we need to save him from saving us from sin. Here the doctrine of the two governances, the proper distinction between law and gospel, and the two kinds of righteousness may be helpful. What liberationists claim about the work of Jesus on the cross depends on how they view the seriousness of our sin, the reality of death, and the work of the devil.

The Atonement as Too Violent?

Fourth, the doctrine of the atonement is considered distasteful because it is measured as too violent. Critics say that the imagery of the shedding of innocent blood does not promote Jesus as a moral example for us to follow. They also noted that the Father punishing his Son contradicts the real meaning of the cross, a symbol of God's love.

The Lutheran Confessions do not have a problem with violent imagery. Luther wrote in the Small Catechism that Jesus redeemed us "not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent

suffering and death" (SC II, 4). Consider Luther's two sermons from 1537 and 1538:

The body and the blood of Christ are a medicine against the poison which the devil in Paradise put into death and sin. This is the medicine: It is by His death and the shedding of His blood that He takes away your death. Therefore, so that you never forget it, I have instituted the Sacrament.⁶⁷

That we die, we who are children of death, is not something to wonder at. But that the Lord of death dies, that is something to ponder. When death and sin stare threatening at us, then let us look to the death of our Lord What does my death amount to? However, when the Lord of life dies, then one little drop of his blood does more than the death of all men. So then we leave behind us every distress. For he did not die for his own sake but for ours. . . .⁶⁸

The comfort that Luther preaches in the drinking of the blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper was never possible without the shedding of blood in violent death. Luther also wrote: "Our God, however, has his honor in this: that for our sakes he gives himself down to the utmost depth, into flesh and bread, into our mouth, heart, and bosom, and more, for our sakes he *suffers* [*leidet*] himself to be dishonorably treated both upon *the cross and altar*."⁶⁹ Jesus does not ask us how to be our Savior. He does the job himself. People worry about losing credentials in becoming fragile. Only God could be so humble and weak. *Jesus alone* suffers. Only God acts at Calvary. The cross and the altar: these two points are inseparable.

The Atonement as Irrelevant?

Finally, we heard that the doctrine of the atonement is irrelevant. It is said that since culture has influenced theories of the atonement in the past, it is our task today to develop images and models for the atonement that speak to our own cultural context. The joyous task of the church is to proclaim the gospel in a way people may comprehend it; this does not mean, however, that we need to change the content of the gospel. According to the Lutheran Confessions, the doctrine of the atonement remains relevant, not only because it is a confession that is given through

⁶⁷ WA 45:201,10-17; E. Ellwein, *D. Martin Luther Epistel-Auslegung* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), 2:135; translated and quoted in Norman Nagel, "Viaticum Death," in *Shepherd the Church: Essays in Honor of the Rev. Dr. Roger D. Pittelko*, ed. Frederic W. Baue, John W. Fenton, Eric C. Forss, Frank J. Pies, and John T. Pless (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2002), 192.

⁶⁸ WA 46:479,10-16; Ellwein, *D. Martin Luther*, 138; translated and quoted in Nagel, "Viaticum Death," 193.

⁶⁹ WA 23:157,30-33; LW 37:72 (emphasis added).

the Scriptures but also because it is a part of the dynamic ministry of Jesus as the shepherd. He speaks law and gospel to us who dwell in a feel-good therapeutic culture and a capitalist consumerist society. The Lutheran Confessions do not suggest that we start with our experience of an "absolute faith" to reinterpret biblical doctrine in order to suit the need of modern people. Justification *before men* and justification *before God* need to be distinguished.⁷⁰ Our Lord continues to address us through apostolic preaching: "Be reconciled with God."

IV. Conclusion

The church confessed by the Lutheran Confessions as the place where Christ's work of *reconciliation* occurs is not an abstract notion. Week after week, Jesus baptizes, speaks, and gives out his body and blood.⁷¹ There are only two possible resting places for sin: It either rests on us or it lies on Christ, the Lamb of God. The unanimous voice of the Confessions is that Jesus became our substitute. *He alone, in our place, and for us*, shed his blood to answer for all our sins: the *vicarious atonement*. He has done it all the way through, once and for all. "It is finished." The atonement is surely and completely done, as surely as the body and blood of our Lord are given to us.

The way that the Lutheran Confessions deal with the doctrine of the atonement teaches us that when doctrine is right, doctrine delivers. What is at stake is not whether the doctrine is right or wrong. Rather, the proper approach to doctrine is to discern whether it confesses Christ *for you*, which eliminates all our efforts. The moment we think that we have done it, we have destroyed it. The Lutheran Confessions stand against every way that diminishes Christ and his atoning and gift-bestowing office and work.

⁷⁰ Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁷¹ There is no doubt that our hymnal, now *Lutheran Service Book*, has played an important role in keeping the church from temptations. Which page of the Divine Service does *not* confess the atonement? From the very beginning of the service the congregation hears a pastor speak: "Almighty God in His mercy *has given His Son to die for you and for His sake forgives you all your sins.*" The church sings to Jesus as the Lamb of God in the *Gloria in Excelsis* and the *Agnus Dei*. After the *Sanctus*, the pastor prays to the Father: ". . . You . . . sent Your only-begotten Son into our flesh to bear our sin and be our Savior. With repentant joy we receive the salvation accomplished for us by the all-availing sacrifice of His body and His blood on the cross." Then, the *Our Father, Verba, Pax Domini*, and distribution formula continue, which are all related to the atonement.

